THE SMOKING APEMAN

TRUE REPORT OR LEGEND AS LIFE?

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French folklorist and Fortean Michel Meurger, author of *Lake Monster Traditions* and numerous other works in French and English on the cultural aspects of the field, examines the interplay of folklore and reportage in tales of sasquatch abductions.

1. THE ASSESSMENT OF MONSTER ACCOUNTS

When dealing with modern accounts of mysterious animals, one can say that cryptozoologists are generally accustomed to put the cart before the horse. They avoid debate by postulating from the start that the question of origins is already settled: creatures in the shadows belong to nature and therefore to the zoological or anthropological fields. Blinded by their neo-euhemerism, speculative zoologists forget to take account of the difference between a sasquatch and a gorilla. In the last case, the reality of the great anthropoids is an unquestioned fact. Such consensus makes easier a distribution of tasks. In the study of gorillas, there is a place for both a natural as well as a cultural approach. But since the reality of the sasquatch still remains undecided, the problem of attribution becomes an acute one. Does the sasquatch belong to the natural or to the social scientist?

Well, as a Fortean, I would suggest that we should adopt an inclusive stance, and that, instead of trying to take all the bedclothes, "naturalists" and "culturalists" should join forces in a multidisciplinary effort, aiming at a constructive criticism of their respective positions. Cryptozoologists giving up their claims to hegemony would have to admit the legitimacy of various approaches towards the question of mysterious animals. Now what might be the specific contribution of a cultural researcher to the field? He will never have to prove or disprove the existence of a sasquatch with the tools of the natural scientist. But he can disclose the shortcomings of a purely zoological or folkloristic analysis. For example, one should view the Gévaudan affair as a complex interplay between nature and culture, where cultural models shaped testimonal reports, and wolves coalesced into a single "beast". The zoological side of the Gévaudan case is conspicuous. But not the cryptozoological one. For mainstream historians the predator of 1767 was only a huge wolf, and the hyena-hypothesis espoused by some cryptozoologists is coolly received **[1]**.

Cultural researchers may also contribute to a better evaluation of the available source material. A reference to an observation of a dragon in the specific context of the Swiss popular culture of the 17th century is proof of a shared belief. To extract such a narrative from its cultural matrix and interpret it according to our modern knowledge of palaeontology smacks of anachronism. Similary, to translate a tribal monster (for example the 'Mokélé-Mbêmbé') into a dinosaur may be classified as an extreme case of ethnocentrism. Folklore is not a self-service counter where cryptozoologists may freely select attractive items; if they want to be recognized as serious researchers, they need to learn a bit more about the status and function of legendary creatures.

Again, they should know that in folk culture, traditional stories are often presented as first-hand encounters and appropriated by story-tellers. Take the statement of a Swede, Magnus Johansson. In the second half of the 19th century, this informant told an ethnographer that a long time ago, during his childhood, he was leisurely walking alongside the bank of a lake. Then, Johansson saw a long tree-trunk. One end of it vanished in a bush, while the other plunged into the water. "Thinking it was just a log, I quickly jumped over it. Judging then that the thing had a weird look, after a few steps I turned around to investigate. I discovered that it was not a stump, but a living animal, a giant snake of the species we call a 'drake'." **[2]**

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1 - Michel Meurger: "A Hyena for the Gevaudan. Testimonial reports and cultural stereotypes", in *Fortean Studies,* vol.4, 1998, pp.219-229.

2 - Hyltén-Cavallius, Gunnar Olof: *Om Draken Eller Lindormen,* Wexjö, 1885, p.54, case 29, as quoted by M. Meurger: "The Lindorms of Småland", in: *Arv. Nordic Yearbook of Folklore,* 1996, The Royal Gustavus-Adolphus Academy, Uppsala, Sweden, pp.87-98 (p.94).

The realistic veneer of this alleged experience should not deter us from recognizing in it a folklore motif, 'the trunk that came to life'. The motif of the animated stump is both centuries-old and still used. I heard a variant of Magnusson's story in Canada (1981) during my field study on lake monsters **[3]**). We have no way to decide whether the Swede was consciously pulling the leg of the ethnographer or unconsciously adapting a hazy episode of his childhood to a literary type learned by oral transmission. Rather, what should interest us here is that an alleged report about an encounter with the Scandinavian dragon-snake was simply a retelling of an age-old legend.

2. SNUFF OF FREEDOM

We can find numerous examples of this treacherous form of exposition in contemporary monster stories. I have selected a 'classical' case to pinpoint the necessity of a cultural reappraisal of controversial issues. No debate about sasquatchery will fail to include the story of the man abducted by the giants of British Columbia. In 1957, John Green, a newspaperman, owner of the Agassiz *Advance*, asked a retired lumberman, Albert Ostman, to write a full statement about an alleged misadventure which had befallen him 34 years ago. Green published Ostman's account in his newspaper, along with a sworn affidavit where the old man testified to the truth of his deposition.

According to the lumberman, in 1924, he was camping at the head of Toba inlet, opposite Vancouver; one night, a sasquatch attacked him. The eight-foot giant grabbed him in his sleeping bag and the unfortunate man made a gruelling journey, slung over the creature's back, before reaching the lair of the sasquatch's family. Ostman saw four hairy humanoids: his captor, the 'old man', the old lady, and two young ones, a boy and a girl. He remained their prisoner for around a week. Then, thinking of a fellow 'who saved himself from a mad bull by blinding him with snuff in his eyes', the lumberman accustomed the young sasquatch to tobacco, thus attracting the curiosity of the big male, who came closer each day. One morning, as Ostman was taking his snuff, the old man reached for the box. But instead of taking a pinch the giant 'grabbed the box and emptied it in his mouth. Swallowed it in one gulp. Then he licked the box inside with his tongue'. The sasquatch became ill. While the whole family was attracted by his jumps and grunts, Ostman escaped **[4]**.

A number of commentators on this extraordinary statement have expressed doubts about its content **[5]**. But, generally, critics have mainly underlined the unlikeliness of some minor point, without taking account of the ludicrous nature of Ostman's mean of escape. And yet, like a skilled story teller, the informant strengthened the farcical aspects of the situation by his graphic description of the convulsive movements of the snuff-guzzler, the poor monster's eyes rolling up into his head, his futile attempt to soothe his pain by emptying the captive's coffee pot. Then the old man: 'Stuck his head between his legs and rolled forwards a few times away from me. Then he began to squeal like a stuck pig' **[6]**.

Researchers should had been alerted by the strong fishy smell about this too highly-coloured narrative. They should also have remembered that Ostman, as a lumberjack, was undoubtly a connoisseur of a woodsmen's folklore replete with tongue-in-cheek encounters with imaginary denizens of the forest **[7]**.

The gimmick of the snuff-box betrays the relationship of Ostman's story with tales of presents to spirits of the wilderness. Thus the 'corupira' or 'caapora' plays a central role in Brazilian folklore as a lord of the woods and protector of wild animals. He is sometimes described as a dwarf covered with hair, walking with his feet put on backward. To obtain permission to shoot deer, the hunter must

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3 - See M. Meurger: *Lake Monster Traditions. A Cross Cultural Analysis,* Fortean Tomes, London, 1988, p.82.

4 - John Green: *On the Track of the Sasquatch,* Cheam Publishing, Agassiz, British Columbia, 1968, chapter 4, pp.13-21.

5 - See, for some criticism, the works of: Ivan T. Sanderson: *Abominable Snowmen: Legend Come to Life,* Chilton Company, Philadelphia and New York, 1961, p.52, John Napier: *Bigfoot,* Berkley Medallion Books, New York, 1974, pp.76-77, Myra Shackley: *Wildmen, Yeti, Sasquatch and the Neanderthal Enigma,* Thames and Hudson, London, 1983, p.38, Barbara Wasson: *Sasquatch Apparitions,* Bend, Oregon, 1979, p.12.

6 - Green: *op. cit.*, p.20.

7 - M. Meurger: *Lake Monster Traditions,* pp.236-237, 253-254.

Fig.1: The one-legged wood-spirit, sacy perere (From Zerries, 1954 – see note 8)

placate the 'caapora' by offerings of tobacco. In the south of the country, Indians fear the 'sacy perere', a son of the master of the forest. The accompanying illustration shows the 'sacy' as a one-legged little man, flourishing a pipe **[8]**.

Encounters with the 'caapora' are not always awe-inspiring experiences. There is sometimes a prankish element in the narrative, as in the following story, included in a book on Brazilian legends published in 1889. Here the lord of the wild things is described as a giant. The informant also vouched for the genuineness of the adventure. One of his uncles was lost in the forest. He lit a fire. The flames attracted the 'caapora'. The genius asked the man for his cigar. The Brazilian put the muzzle of his gun in the giant's mouth, and saying 'here, take my cigar', pulled the trigger. Smoke issued from the mouth of the 'caapora', who, undaunted, answered: 'Your tobacco is not strong enough, but tastes good'. Then he vanished **[9]**.

When I found this tale, I believed I had discovered a literary parallel to the snuff box episode. Yet one must remember that Ostman was of Swedish origin, and that he may have received the motif of the tobacco offering in its twisted variant from a family tradition. There is even an account, strikingly similar to the lumberman's one, from the French Alps. During the last century, traditions were circulating among mountaineers of the Dauphiné, about a race of apemen, the 'Marfolats'. They were described as simian giants, covered with hair. Such creatures, living in the most secluded valleys, were seldom seen, but now and then people found their huge footprints in snow. In *Coutumes et traditions du Dauphiné* (1977), Claude Muller published the narrative of an encounter with the 'marfolats'. The grandfather of one informant, a schoolmaster, gathered it from the mouth of the alleged witness, Old Man Bourne, and wrote it in his diary. As a youngster of about 25 years of age, Bourne was a sturdy woodcutter. On a moonlit night, he returned from a visit to his fiancée, when, in a wood, he was attacked by a great 'marfolat'. The giant snatched Bourne, and flung the mountaineer on his back 'like a sack of bran'. The captive lost consciousness. When he awakened, the woodcutter saw himself surrounded by a group of 'marfolats'. They were like apes with extremely long arms and human faces. A male, two-and-a-half metres tall, towered above them. A young female exhibited so huge a bosom, that it would have aroused the covetous looks of the best-endowed mountain lasses. Bourne escaped when a male took his pipe from his mouth and begun to scrunch it. Other apemen tried to grab the morsel, a brawl followed, and the youngster took advantage of the chaos to slip away **[10]**.

If we compare Bourne and Ostman'stories, we can find no less than eight concordances between the two narratives.

1. Both informants are loggers.
2. Bourne and Ostman are old men, remembering an alleged misadventure from their youth.
3. They are captured by night, in a mountain wood.
4. Both are flung over the back of their captor.
5. Their abductors are hairy giants.

8 - Otto Zerries: *Wild und Buschgeister in Südamerika,* Steiner, Wiesbaden, 1954, pp.10-12.

9 - F. de Santa-Anna Nery: *Folklore brésilien,* Perrin, Paris, 1889, p.255. See also: Stith-Thompson: *Motif Index of Folk Literature,* Enlarged Edition, Vol. 4, Copenhagen, 1957. Motif K.1057: "Gun as tobacco pipe".

10 - Claude Muller: *Coutumes et traditions du Dauphiné,* Editions des Quatre-Seigneurs, Grenoble, 1977, pp.128-130.

6. The huge creature brings them to a family or clan.

7. There is in the group a female with big (Bourne) or pendulous (Ostman) breasts **[11]**.

8. Lastly, in both cases, tobacco plays the same part, as a freeing device. A male chews Bourne's pipe, while the 'old man' swallows Ostman'snuff box.

Such similarities are too numerous to be ascribed to chance. While we have yet to find other elaborations of the same motif, we may tentatively conclude this short essay by stating that Bourne and Ostman's narratives appear to be personalized versions of older legends. Notwithstanding the comical nature of the purported events, both informants maintained to the end that their tales were actual experience **[12]**.

No specific reasons are given for the abductions of two young and healthy men. Yet, according to Don Hunter, in later discussions with René Dahinden, Ostman hinted 'that he was taken as a mate for the daughter' **[13]**. Similarly, since Bourne had a fiancée, one may assume that he was also taken as a companion for the young 'marfolat' with an impressive bosom. One may interpret such stories as attenuated versions of traditional narratives, where the union between a man and a wild girl really took place. Significantly, in Scandinavia there were legends of abductions of men by troll-women or giantesses.

But in the modern versions of the tales, in Dauphiné and British Columbia, the real grounds for the kidnappings are hidden and the capture of the two men appears quite purposeless **[14]**.

3. CONCLUSION

Ostman is now dead and it would be an impossible task to decide if he was a hoaxer, or merely an old codger, enjoying the attention given to him thanks to his hilarious saga, a weird mixture of faded remembrances and legendary embroidering. While our interpretation of the case cannot be used by debunkers to refute the validity of all sasquatch reports, it should prompt researchers to deal more cautiously with testimony.

The orthodox cryptozoological approach, with too strong an emphasis on natural sciences, cannot be of any help to detect literary motifs dressed up as factual circumstances. Hence the value of alternative ways of dealing with claims, through folklore and sociology. From another side of the argument, as Forteans, we are open to the mythopoetic dimension of the tall tale. Thus, instead of booing Ostman, we should relish the long-enduring salty flavour of his good yarn. The logger's tale may even teach us a lesson: when apemen are trying to imitate men, they make dangerous smokers.

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11 - Ostman, about the 'old lady': 'some of those lovable brassieres and uplifts would have been a great improvement on her looks and her figure' (Green: *op. cit.*, p.19). Analysing descriptions of the female sasquatch as both hairy and endowed with large pendulous breasts, Richard Beeson states that "one is about as likely to find that combination in the order of primates as a fish on a bicycle" (R. Beeson: "The Improbable Primate and Modern Myth", in *The Scientist Looks at the Sasquatch* (II), edited by Roderick Sprague and Grover S. Krantz, University Press of Idaho, 1979, p.176.

12 - Muller: *op. cit.*, p.128.

13 - Don Hunter, with René Dahinden: *Sasquatch*, Signet Books, New York, 1975, p.49.

14 - It would be interesting to investigate Russian folklore, to see if one can find variants on the motif of the tobacco offering. Indeed, according to Gubernatis, tobacco was offered to the 'Lieschi' (Russian wood-demon). See Angelo de Gubernatis: *La Mythologie des Plantes*, Reinwald, Paris, 1878, p.357.